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In the Bones

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by Eric B. Anderson

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LASTING

Screamingly funny. That's how it feels. *Screamingly funny.*

What's the last thing to go through a bug's head when it hits a windshield?

Its ass.

Screamingly funny.

I can feel the pellets, like a spray of hot sand suddenly whipped by the wind. My eyes are closed but my mind is clear as I feel the heat.

What's the last thing...

I've told that one already.

The pellets are small. Buckshot. Not perfectly round, but jagged, rough. I've held them in my hands before. Many times before. They were cold in my hand, metallic.

Small stones. Even as I held them, I wondered what usefulness such a creation could have, other than death. Hunting with a shotgun would be like petting your dog with a baseball bat.

Screamingly funny.

No, a shotgun is good for only one thing.

Muscles I've worked on for years constrict with ferocity that I didn't know they possessed. My hands on the stock, on the barrel, on the ground are as vivid as colors are to a baby the first time it opens its eyes.

I taste metal.

I taste blood.

They taste the same.

What's the last thing that goes through a bug's head...

Bones are more brittle than sturdy, a house built of eggshells. The sound is muted, but I can feel the cracks, the chipping, the fragmented shards. My ears ring, then roar, then dangle from loose flesh.

My mind is electric, frantically firing the synapses in an effort to reconnect, reconnect, reconnect...

My back hits the floor as my brain sends out its final
signals like a beacon into deep space, searching for life. A
shiver courses down my spine, my crumpled body
trembling in its twisted-pretzel hump. I'm a chicken.
Dancing after the ax has fallen.

Look at what you've done to the ceiling.

Screamingly funny.

How can I look when my eyes are pockmarks in crater-
marked wall? I think they're over there by the lamp.

That's going to stain.

What's the last thing...

You don't get a second chance to make a last impression.

He's a face man. A face man. A face man.

Where's my face, man?

What's the last thing...

Screamingly.

RINGFINGER

Eddie was drunk. *Wasted.*

Floating down the whisky river.

It had been a bad day, just the kind of day that would drive a person to a bar stool at Jimmy's Tap on Hill Street, pounding down one shot after another, trying to erase its memory. Although the writhing, twisted ache in his stomach told him that erasure would be impossible, Eddie was sure going to try.

He'd been all over town since he got the ring, but the town hadn't been all over him; he couldn't find any takers. Every time he took the damn thing out of his pocket, it clouded up on him. "Diamonds are supposed to be clear, son," the first guy told him. No shit. No fucking shit.

And it had been. That's why he had to have it. It was the biggest goddamn rock he'd ever seen and as clear as a

raindrop. At another shop, he was almost out of the place with a cool two thousand bucks when the guy came around the counter after him, cussing and brandishing a gun longer than Eddie was tall. The guy threw both the ring, and him, out of the store. Eddie had picked the ring up just in time to see a cloud, like a puff of smoke, swirl inside the diamond and vanish.

Now, after ten hours with no takers and little hope of figuring out the cause of the diamond's flaw, Eddie decided to do what he did best—get himself completely, stinking drunk.

“Bill...Bill...set me up, Bill,” Eddie's words were beginning to slip and slide around his tongue uncertainly. Bill shook his head, like he always did when Eddie came in and stayed too long, but he grabbed the open bottle of scotch and filled Eddie's glass.

Getting rid of the ring wasn't the worst of it. No, not at all. At the last couple of shops he stopped at, he almost pulled the lady's finger out with it. The finger was curled up into a ball and squeezed tight as a vice grip around the ring, like the woman was still fighting him for it.

Leaning away from the bar, he shoved his hand deep inside his trench coat, fumbled past the butt of his sawed-off shotgun and found the ring finger. It was relaxed now. He felt the sharp edge of the woman's nail pinch into the soft flesh under his index finger. With his

thumb, he hooked the underside of the ring and slowly nudged it off until it fell loose, like he'd done half a dozen times that day. He should've just gotten rid of the damn finger, but he was a sucker for souvenirs. This one was better than the gold tooth he'd knocked out of that old man on Brick Street. That one had almost gotten him killed. Besides, having the finger made the ring easier to keep track of.

He produced the ring for Bill, proudly holding it out in front of him like a child displaying his first lost baby tooth. The ring was solid gold, surely eighteen karat, about four millimeters thick. The diamond was at least one karat itself, and crystal clear, like a perfectly formed ice chip.

Bill looked at Eddie, at the ring, then at Eddie again. "What's this supposed to do for me?"

"Buy me drinks for a year, man."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"I'll just give it to you," Eddie began to sweat again. He needed a drink, and he took one. "I'll give it to you for my drinks for a year."

"What makes you think I want a hot ring? There's no market for that stuff around here anymore."

“It ain’t stolen . . . it’s my mother’s.” Sweat was beginning to drip from Eddie’s forehead, hanging from his eyelids, stinging his eyes. He could swear he felt the finger move, poke his leg, prodding him to give the ring back. The flawless depths of the diamond clouded. He felt sick. “It’s my mother’s and she gave it to me, but I ain’t got no use for it. I don’t have a woman and like you said, there’s no market for that stuff any more.”

“Now see, Ed, we’re back where we started.” He looked at the ring disapprovingly. “Start digging in your pockets for something I can put in my cash register, or you’re ass is gonna be meeting the street.” Bill winked, not a friendly gesture but a silent promise, and turned his back on Eddie, replacing the bottle of whiskey in its designated position.

Eddie thought he felt the finger poking him again and the stone turned the milky white of a geode. His hands trembling, he dipped into his pocket and slid the ring back onto the finger. He swayed back on his stool once more, this time jamming his hand deep into his pants pocket and producing a crumpled wad of green bills. He laid a ten on the bar. He counted the rest of the bills, fanning them out on the bar . . . twenty, thirty, forty . . . forty dollars? He reached in his pocket again, but came up empty. He could feel fresh drops of sweat beading up on his forehead.

. . . Jesus freakin’ Christ . . .

The couple had looked like they were worth a couple hundred at the low end. He pegged them as being either tourists or very, very new to the area from the second he saw them. They were walking away from their car at the time; it looked like a Jag, but Eddie didn't see any emblem on the front. Emblem or not, anyone who was in the area for more than a day knew not to park a car like that on the street, not even in daylight. The man was about Eddie's height--not too short, not too tall, but just right his mom used to say--and wore a black suit that looked like it had never seen the outside of a closet. The lady was wrapped in a knee-length black skirt. Eddie didn't notice much above that at first.

Then came the map. Eddie couldn't help but grin when he saw it. It was in one of those "WELCOME TO OUR CITY" pamphlets they passed out at the visitors' centers and sent out to new residents. The couple only got about four steps away from the car before they were opening it up. Two more steps and Eddie had caught up with them, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"Hey, you know what? You two look lost."

He stepped in front of them and was instantly caught off guard by the paleness of the man's eyes. If it weren't for

the pure whiteness surrounding the iris, it would have been easy to miss the color altogether.

“We are . . . kind of.”

It was the woman’s voice. Eddie looked at her face now. Her face was round, but nowhere near chubby, with a little turned-up nose fixed in the middle of it. Her mid-length blond hair spilled into her face and she brushed it back with her hand. Her dark eyebrows accentuated the paleness of her own eyes. Eddie suddenly felt cold, but shrugged it off. He looked at her hands. Around her ring finger was the tiny package of trouble now resting uncomfortably in Eddie’s pocket.

“Hey . . . how ‘bout bringing me back my change?”
Eddie’s head was swimming and, somewhere in the past minute, Bill had become Siamese twins, joined at the shoulder, then at the butt, then the shoulder . . . it was making him sick. He closed his eyes.

There was the face again: the top of the skull fragmented bone chips, the cloudy white eyes, the grimacing mouth, twitching, corners pointed downward, opened in a silent scream.

GIVE ME MY RING.

Twice as quickly as he had closed them, Eddie's eyes reopened. The face was gone. It was just Bill again, moving around the bar, refilling drinks, and listening to stories. Good old Bill. Eddie's chest felt tight and he realized he was holding his breath. He opened his mouth, feeling the muscles in his throat relax slowly, allowing the fire in his lungs to subside.

"Gotta clear my head. Stop spooking myself," he mumbled a bit too loudly, eliciting another disapproving glance from Bill. "Yeah, screw you. Fat asshole." He wasn't afraid of Bill, but still he said these words more softly than the first.

The couple had been looking for the new Municipal Center, and Eddie didn't have the heart to tell them they were about two miles off their mark. Instead, he promised to personally show them a shortcut. Without even so much as a concerned look passed between them, the two followed Eddie down the dead-end alley behind Craver Court.

Eddie frowned and began to shut his eyes again, then thought better of it. He felt a twitch in his pocket. He pulled his drink to his lips and swallowed hard. With his

throat drawn tight, it felt like passing a grapefruit through a straw.

“Gotta stop spooking myself,” he repeated.

He swiveled his seat toward the crowd, looking for a friendly face. Straining to focus, he found the task more difficult than usual. The room was a sea of shifting heads that danced in the air, switching bodies like contestants in a massive game of musical chairs. Unable to coordinate his eyes to fix on any one thing, he turned back to the bar.

GIVE ME MY RING.

Eddie spun around, facing the crowd. At the table nearest to him was a woman in a black skirt. His glance couldn't catch much more than that at first.

GIVE ME MY RING.

His eyes found focus and froze. His heart thudded against his rib cage.

The woman wore black and white and bled all over.

She held a glass in her left hand and, smiling mischievously at Eddie, brought it slowly to her lips. Between the middle and last finger was an empty space. Blood dripped steadily onto the table from the stump that had been severed just below the second knuckle. She

giggled, and when she did, a red stain spread rapidly across her chest. Eddie squeezed his eyes shut, frantically rubbing them with his index fingers. He felt the finger awaken in his pocket, jerking fiercely against the cloth that held it. A second voice joined the woman's in laughter. It was a man's voice. Eddie opened his eyes.

It was the face again. Blood flowed freely from the gaping crevice where the man's hair once was, flowed past his thin blond eyebrows, around the creases of the eyelids that encased the pale blue eyes. The man smiled now; a humorless smile, cracking his narrow features. The smile became a grimace of pain, then a gaping, twitching hole. A choked hiss began to emit from the man's lips as blood bubbled to foam between them.

Eddie reeled backward, toppling from the bar stool and hitting the ground hard, his tailbone connecting squarely with the hardwood floor. The man laughed again, his eyes cloudy but somehow piercing Eddie's skull. Eddie frantically scrambled backward in a bizarre crab walk, not concerned with or capable of getting to his feet. His head connected in a savage collision with the underside of a booth, and a flash of brilliant white obscured his vision.

"Here . . . let me help you."

Eddie felt a hand on his arm, pulling him from the floor.

“Oh . . . man . . .” Eddie swayed unsteadily at the head of the booth. His vision was hazier than before. He could barely make out the outline of the figure standing in front of him. Then the man spoke. The words sounded forced, the voice deep and muddled.

“Hey, you know what? You look lost.”

Eddie snapped away from the man’s grasp, wheeling wildly in reverse. His back hit a wall and he feverishly felt his way around the corner, into the men’s room. He fell to his knees and crawled into the nearest stall, slamming the door behind him. With badly trembling fingers, he slid the thin dead bolt into place and sat back on the stool, trying to control his breathing.

Oh Jesus, oh shit, oh Jesus, oh shit . . .

He waited, breathing in short, rapid bursts. The restroom door pushed open. His breathing stopped.

“Eddie?” The stall door rattled. It was Bill’s voice.

“Eddie? What the fuck’s the matter with you?”

“Get out, Bill.” Eddie’s voice was a tense whisper.

“Fuck you. You make a scene in my bar, then tell me to get the fuck out? What the fuck’s wrong with you?” Bill’s voice had taken on a higher pitch; a pitch that Eddie knew meant trouble for him.

“I’m not feeling so good, okay?” That was the truth. “I just felt sick in there. I went nuts.”

“Fuckin’-A right you did. Puke your brains out, or whatever you need to do, and then get the hell out of my bar,” Bill moved toward the door. He stopped. “And try walking out, will ya?”

Eddie waited until he heard the door close again, then slid to the floor and hugged the toilet. He hovered over the opening and let go of the drinks he’d gotten down, as well as lunch, breakfast and most of yesterday’s leftovers. He stopped gagging, spit a string of yellow bile into the water and sat back. His gun rested at an angle with his hip and was digging in painfully. He shifted his weight to his left side and pulled it out from under his coat. He fished a shell from his pocket and, with trembling hands, fumbled to reload.

The shotgun was pitifully beaten up. His Pop gave it to him and he’d sawed it off for easier transporting. It was a long time since he’d had to fire it; facing the barrel of a shotgun, no matter how shoddy, was enough for most people. He’d been sure the thing wouldn’t fire. But he’d been wrong.

The guy handed over his money easily enough. But the lady was more difficult; she couldn't give up her precious ring. Eddie couldn't give it up either.

He wasn't even sure what had happened at first. He argued with the bitch, he felt a hand on his hand, pushing, knocking him backward and he heard the gun go off. When he looked up again, the guy was on the ground, his brain spread halfway across the alley.

He should have been dead, but his mouth was still moving, his jaws opened and closed mechanically, and the bitch kept trying to talk to him, sobbing, telling him he'd be all right.

That's when his eyes caught Eddie's. Those chalky blue eyes burned Eddie's, looked inside him, through him. He lost it. Eddie started screaming at the bitch to give him the fucking ring and then he heard the gun go off a second time. A flash of red flesh emblazoned itself across the woman's chest. She fell neatly on top of the man; two bodies, stacked sloppily in a pile. Finally, the clouded crystalline eyes went glassy.

Eddie stood for a moment, mouth agape, staring at the broken corpses. He stumbled a path around them, surveying the damage. Then his instincts kicked in, rescuing him.

Eddie knelt and held the woman's hand, gingerly at first, then tugging. While the rest of her hand had relaxed, the ring finger was curled tightly around the ring, one fifth of a fist, but five times as strong. He pried at the finger, grunting. *Bitch . . . you fucking BITCH.*

He had come too far to just let it go. He was sweating. Shock wore thin, replaced by panic. Then he had an idea. He grabbed the ring finger and jerked it back hard, producing a loud pop as the joint cracked in half. Two minutes and one razor-sharp switchblade later, the deed was done. He ran, not looking back.

They had followed.

They were dead.

He had their ring.

They were dead.

They had found him . . .

They were . . .

. . . *dead?* The woman's voice echoed hollowly across the white tile. Too close. *Oh no . . . oh, poor Ed.*

Such a shame about Ed. The man's voice. Closer.
Colder.

Eddie's eyes darted frantically around the stall.

Floor . . . ceiling . . . door . . . lock . . . LOCK.

Oh God, please hold. Oh please.

A splash of white light pushed its way through the dense fabric of Eddie's jeans as he felt the severed finger pressing down, hot against his flesh. The subtle glow of the ring ignited, now a brilliant white, blinding him. The shotgun hit the floor with a hollow metallic thud.

Uh, oh . . . bad news, Ed . . .

The woman's voice was a whisper, then a giggle.

. . . Ed's dead . . .

The voices were inside the stall.

Eddie feverishly fumbled for the shotgun, feeling his way across the cold tile, his hands trembling and jerking in a terrified dance.

. . . please . . .

His fingertips skirted the edge of the shotgun's muzzle.

. . . please . . .

He slid the gun toward him, wrapping his hand tightly around the grip.

. . . oh . . . GOD

A fierce pulse of blood filled his face as the finger pierced his leg, exploding inward. He let out a sharp cry and clawed at his pants, clutching and ripping at the loose cloth, but it was inside his muscle, tearing upward with surprising swiftness. A crimson ebb seeped from the small circular wound halfway up Eddie's thigh, spreading across the denim of his jeans like water. He heard the voices.

Eddie's dead. Dead Ed. They were coming from all sides, taunting him. *Poor Ed. Eddie's dead.* Eddie thrust the barrel of the gun into the air.

"I didn't mean to hurt anybody!" he heard himself shouting. He began to sob, his words coming in short bursts. "Please . . . I didn't . . . mean . . . to!" The terror crackling through his limbs was only overshadowed by the intensity of the pain crawling inside his leg.

He didn't mean to . . . mean to . . .

Eddie, deadie . . .

The burrowing limb had reached his pelvis and swelled to the size of a large rodent. And now it was pulsing, wiggling like a cat getting ready to pounce. The throbbing ebbed and waned, building to . . . what?

GIVE ME MY RING.

It burst forward into Eddie's abdomen.

Eddie's dead Eddie's dead Eddie's dead eds deaded ded dead . . .

The chants gathered in force as Eddie's stomach began to eat itself. His chest rose and fell, each time dipping further and further toward his spine.

Eddie's dead. Eddie's dead.

Eddie's dead Eddie's deaded sdeaded sdeaded ded deaded ded dead . . .

"Oh God . . . please . . . I didn't mean to," Eddie spat blood onto his shirt. His eyes had begun to cry crimson tears. "Oh God, oh shit, oh God." Eddie lost his grip on the shotgun and it fell back against his chest.

"Oh . . . God."

He stared into the barrel, past the blackness and saw a light at the end of the tunnel. His mind clear, his hands no longer trembling, he smiled. The blast echoed off the cold tile as Eddie left Jimmy's Tap for the last time.

Bill was rushing for the bathroom door when it opened, and he stopped cold. Eddie stumbled forward--his head

down---and stopped. A shock of blonde hair had appeared among his black, greasy mane.

The bar was silent but for the squeak of chair legs across hardwood, as startled patrons turned to look or raced for the exit.

Bill saw past Eddie's shoulder into the bathroom, and he began to shudder.

The walls were slathered with blood, more blood than a human body could hold. It drenched the stall where Eddie had lain, peppered the ceiling, pooled on the floor. Yet there wasn't a drop on Eddie as he shuffled his feet and crept slowly past Bill. The door swung shut with a soft thud. Eddie moved toward his seat, felt the stool with his hands, slid awkwardly to the bar.

Bill met him there. "What . . ." he whispered, ". . . the fuck . . . happened, Eddie?"

Eddie's arms rested on the bar. A small, red pool formed beneath his left hand. His fingers slowly uncurled and the ring landed heavily against the wood as it dropped from his hand. Eddie's skin was dark, his hands thick, but his ring finger was light, feminine, longer than the others. Splotches of the same whiteness swam across his arms, his face, the exposed skin of his neck. A red stain appeared in the center of his chest, spreading rapidly in all directions, then, just as abruptly, disappeared.

“It’s okay, Bill.” Eddie’s voice was thick, choked. He smiled, his cheekbones narrowing as his grin widened, his rapidly lightening skin pulling taut. His skull opened, the left side of his face disappearing into a gaping hole. With an almost audible groan, bone appeared in the hole, followed by a slow crawl of skin that met just above his left eye. His shoulders slumped and crackled; his body appeared to fold into itself like a condemned house collapsing on its foundation. He raised his head, and Bill recoiled as if he’d been hit.

The woman’s face was round, but lean, with a smallish turned-up nose fixed in the middle of it. Mid-length blond hair spilled into her face and she brushed it back with a casual flourish. Icy blue eyes met Bill’s, eyes so pale they glowed. She smiled. “I got my ring.”

Long. Blonde

I met someone last night. I call her M. Her hair is long, like her legs, and blonde. And while her face is not --- as the cliché goes --- that of an angel, I find myself failing to care. Her hair is long, blonde.

There is something fascinating about truly blonde hair. The way the light catches it and rides it down when a woman turns her head. The way it blends with my skin when I wrap it around my fingers. My father always likened the true blonde to gold: rare, hard to find, and more often than not you'll find out you've got a fake.

M. moved into the apartment across the hall. I was concerned that we were gaining yet another octogenarian occupant, but it turned out that the white haired woman puffing up the stairs ahead of me was merely the landlord's mother, come to install shelf paper in the kitchen cabinets. I watched from my window as movers brought furniture in, mostly nondescript neutral pieces

that would blend rustically into the hardwood floors and khaki-colored walls. At the very last came the pet taxi, which I feared might contain some variety of yapping canine but which has since turned out to have contained a morbidly obese old cat with white “socks” on its paws and an apparently painful bladder condition. I only guess at the condition because of the ammonia-like stench of urine that emanated from the animal’s prison and the cat’s accompanying deep throated yowling as it was brought inside. I could smell and hear it through the door.

And then came M. Apparently, she had reason to trust the movers she’d hired, because it was only after the truck had been fully emptied that she made her appearance. I could never have given that much trust to strangers, knowing what I know about the world, but it was plain from the moment I saw her that she was not one who’d been touched by the darker things in life. Her eyes still held a childlike brightness, and her smile, while not directed at me, melted my insides from four floors above. Her nose was a button, her lips full and pink. Her ears small, elfin and her hair, well, suffice it to say that I wished my father could have seen it, God rest his soul. My heart sank when I noted the small discoloration at her left temple: a birthmark, perhaps, or a mole. Luckily, I found that when she turned her head away from me again, she regained her former glory. Like I said before, it

was not the face of an angel, but certainly something that I could live with.

I wasted no time in introducing my new neighbor to my not-inconsiderable charms. I've always considered myself quite a catch. I'm well educated, having attended private schools for the entirety of my academic career. I'm tall and broad-shouldered. Strapping, some might say. My jaw-line is chiseled, as are most of my body's features. I've been accused of narcissism, but I prefer to think of it as a healthy self-image, and one's own opinion is the only one that truly matters, after all.

M.'s door opened after the first knock. Apparently she shared some of her feline companion's traits, as I did not hear her moving in the hall and was somewhat startled when the door swept away from my outstretched hand.

"Hello?" she said, her eyes studying me with detached coolness. "May I help you?"

"Actually, madam, it is I who have come to offer you help. I noticed your considerable possessions and thought you might like some assistance in unpacking."

When her expression remained stoic and unflinching, I produced a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and two crystal glasses from behind my back.

“I also find myself in possession of this fine vintage with no one to share it with.” I gave her my most endearing grin, a combination of wickedness and sincerity that even I would have difficulty reproducing.

The door swung inward and she stepped back, granting me entrance. Her expression remained wary, but I could see her resolve already beginning to wane. I should have known better at that moment, but instead I stepped inside.

Her home was littered with boxes, piles and piles of boxes, stacked on end tables, shoved under counters, propped against chairs. It was an even more impressive chaos than I could have predicted.

“The kitchen is this way,” she said, turning down the long hallway that mirrored the one in my own apartment. She stopped for a moment to stroke the ears of the massive cat that had somehow managed to lift itself atop a particularly high piling. The beast’s front paws stretched out gracefully toward M.’s hand, as it kneaded the air and purred a deep, rumbling purr. “I think I have a corkscrew.”

By the time the wine had been uncorked, the glasses filled and our palates thoroughly wetted, M.’s defenses had begun to crumble. I’d learned that she’d been raised in

Siam, Idaho; an exotic name for such a tame region. Her father was a potato farmer, of all things, and she'd grown up modestly, though well taken care of.

She was just twenty-five years old, which might have been troublesome, had I not been able to wear my forty-two years with the youthful swagger of a thirty-year-old. My hair has not yet begun to gray, and I couldn't grow a beard if my safety depended on it, so I avoided the question of age and let her draw her own conclusion, which she was more than willing to do. Most are, I've found.

Her personality was as effervescent as the wine, even more so. My defenses began to give way as well, and I found myself entangling my legs in hers on her overstuffed yellow couch. I hardly noticed the color of her eyes, which was probably a mistake. She giggled when my toes brushed against her bare sole, and jerked her leg back instinctively, jarring the coffee table and the nearly empty bottle of wine. Her hair swept forward like a wave of golden grain caught by the wind as she rushed to steady the bottle. Her reflexes were quick, catlike. I doubted that her tabby could have blinked as fast, let alone moved like that. The bottle saved, she grinned and leaned toward me.

"You talk now," she smiled. The warm, wet heat of her breath, so close, brought a flush to my cheeks.

“Hmm. Yes. Well, what would you like to know?” I stammered as my libido rose up through my body, electrifying the small hairs of my arms and chest. Her nose was nearly touching mine, her eyes tracing my features.

“Anything,” she whispered. She stifled another giggle, but a smile crept to her lips. “I wonder what you taste like.”

“Chicken?” I responded gamely, with an attempt at confidence I no longer felt.

Her smile widened and with that, her full lips were on mine, her tongue deep in my mouth, and I was lost, my composure a thing of the past. I found myself fumbling at buttons, tugging at her shirttail, tugging at the seams of her jeans. Her tongue writhed like a thing possessed, darting into my mouth, lightly tracing my teeth, her teeth softly biting my lower lip. Her hands were at my back, clawing at the fabric. I was breathless.

Then I felt it. A sharp pain in my back. A fingernail had ripped through the fabric of my shirt. No, not a fingernail. A claw. I opened my eyes.

“Not again!” I cried out, truly dismayed.

A pair of slit black irises stared back at me from yellow eyes. The birthmark on her face had been joined by

several others, all of which had mutated and trailed off toward the back of her head in thin stripes of auburn. Downy hair burst from her skin, through my hands which were pressed like a vice against her back, spread over her shoulders, down her arms. And, worst of all, it was black. All black.

She grinned, a grin that had grown more toothsome since I'd last seen it, fangs interlocking, top and bottom.

"What's the matter, honey?" she purred. "Too much wine?"

"Get off of me!" I cried, emphasizing "off" with a shove that had little noticeable effect.

"But I still haven't found out what you taste like. . ." Her mouth opened, her claws sunk deeper into my flesh, biting into muscle. Using what wits I still had about me, I fumbled for the empty wine bottle, but before I could grasp it, M. lashed out, knocking it into the wall where it burst into splinters of glass.

It was then that I remembered a trick that my father had taught me, when I was being tormented regularly by the local bully. I swung my free arm toward the beast's head, striking her pointed ear hard with the flat of my palm.

M. shrieked and reared back, her eyes wild with pain. I used my newfound leverage to thrust her onto the coffee

table. The table splintered as her shoulder cracked its center, splaying the legs outward. M. rolled from the center of the wreckage and was immediately on her feet again, shaking her head sharply to regain equilibrium. A guttural growling reverberated in her throat as her eyes focused again on me. Me --- and the pistol in my hands. Her face showed a glimmer of recognition, and then it was gone, in a flash of gunpowder and smoke.

I carried M.'s plump companion underneath my arm as I returned to my apartment. I couldn't look back as the door swung shut behind me. It was simply too much. Shifting the weight of the cat against my hip, I fished my keys from my pocket and unlocked the door.

M. never told me her tabby's name, so I think I will call it M. as well. I'm certain that the rest of my feline roommates (A. through L., of course) will learn to accept her in time. They always do, in my experience.

A sea of purring fur swirled about my ankles as I cursed my overconfidence and awkwardly attempted to apply bandages to the wounds on my back. Another shirt, another night ruined.

And, somewhere in the distance, I can hear my father laughing.

Sica

From the darkness, the wind whispers across Lake Tallahatchee. It whispers my name.

Celia put down her pen and looked to the window. The wind howled and hammered the cabin with a steady onslaught of snow and ice. The dark interior walls were suffused in lamplight and the warmth of the fire burning in the hearth, but neither afforded the slightest comfort. Sweat slickened her thin, aged skin, glistening in the flickering light.

She took another drink from the glass. The heat of the room had warmed the liquid. She grimaced.

Bitter.

With trembling, withered fingers she picked up the pen and continued.

We have always lived on this lake. For four generations, the Mulrays have been as much a part of this lake as the water that spills across its banks, as the woods that surround it, as the sky that hangs over it. The roots of the weather-etched oaks that conceal our cabin hold the ground in a fierce grip, their beginnings laid against the earth like exposed knuckles, digging their fingers deeper, ever deeper. Such is our claim on the lake. And its claim on us.

It's dark tonight, a black, moonless darkness that drapes the trees and the lake in a death shroud. If this is to finally be the hour of my demise, I shall welcome it. I have become so very tired.

“Mother? He’s coming, Mother.” Mary’s voice echoed down the hall. The wood of the long hallway was lighter, newer than the weathered oak of the outer walls. Celia heard her daughter’s footsteps shuffling slowly, cautiously closer. She could envision Mary’s fingertips tracing the walls of the narrow hallway, dancing lightly over picture frames and mirrors, inching forward, betrayed by blindness.

The strokes of her pen became more hurried.

The troubles began before I came into this world, and may continue long after I’m gone, though I pray this will not be the case.

Many of the natives that predated my family feared the lake. Early settlers had named it Tallahatchee, after the Indian tribe that first lived on its banks. But that is not the name the natives used.

“Sica,” they called it. Bad. Short and simply, “bad.”

The Micmac and Shawnee had long feared the Tallahatchee. When my family came, the Tallahatchee had vanished, but their mark would still be felt. None of the other tribes dared to settle near the lake.

A bulb above the kitchen sink blinked once and burned out with a sizzle. Sweat began to seep through the thick wool of her dressing gown. Her breaths were becoming more labored.

It was 1836 when my grandfather discovered the lake. The area was beautiful then, a lush green thicket of trees surrounding a placid body of water. The sun glanced off of the lake at sunrise and bathed the banks in warmth. It is no wonder that Seamus Mulray’s westward trek ended on the banks of this lake. Seamus and his family built this cabin, a cabin that still stands one-hundred and sixty-three years later.

The howling of the wind barely masked the cries buried within.

Mary appeared at the end of the hall, her white hair wild, haphazardly scattered. The purple veins in her hands marked a path to long, claw-like fingers. Her face still bore the scars of her blinding, deep gashes that trailed into the lines that old age had wrought.

“Go to bed, my precious one,” Celia said. The words sounded more pleading, cloying than she’d intended.

“I’m hungry, mother. So very hungry.”

“I know, beloved. It won’t be long.”

It was not long after my great-great grandfather put up stakes on this land that the troubles began. My father, Joshua Mulray, and his brother Michael were swimming. The boys took to grappling with each other, trying to pull each other under, as young boys are prone to doing. Although my father was older by several years, Michael was the bigger and stronger of the two. After several minutes of playful wrestling, Michael got the better of my father, grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him downward. Even as my father began to struggle, Michael continued to hold him down, kicking at his waving arms, avoiding his frantic hands. Finally, Joshua stopped moving. Michael, realizing what he had done and fearing the worst, quickly grabbed the limp form of his older brother and pulled him to the shore.

My father was not breathing when he reached dry land. Michael shook him and beat on his chest, somehow forcing the water from his lungs, but still he did not breathe. Michael ran to the cabin, tears streaming down his cheeks, shouting for his father. When Seamus and Michael returned to where my father lay, they found him sitting up, smiling, his cheeks flushed with color but otherwise apparently unharmed. This of course filled Michael with both relief and rage. The latter of the two being the stronger emotion, he shook my father and screamed at him until he was blue in the face, but my father continued to smile. Michael later received quite a beating at the hands of Seamus Mulray, but that would be nothing compared to the fate he would ultimately suffer.

My father's mind appeared to be elsewhere after that. His family would talk to him directly, but he seldom answered with anything more than the same distant grin he wore the day the change occurred. They began keeping their distance from him, fearing the worst: that he'd gone mad. They did not know that madness was not the worst of their worries, or that he was only waiting.

When winter came, the wait was over. Lake Tallahatchee is set in a valley, surrounded by bluffs that are treacherous to cross in the best of conditions. This, in part, was the charm of the area. The lake was secluded and safe from the outside world. Protected.

But in the winter, it became a fortress, impenetrable. In the winter, the natives left the valley, knowing that staying inside meant certain death. Only the Tallahatchee had ever survived a winter in the valley. But then, the Tallahatchee were devourers. Cannibals.

When winter settled on my family's land, Seamus, his wife Alice, and Michael found out what my father was grinning about. In the lake, my father had seen what had become of the Tallahatchee, and he knew what he had become.

My father had seen death in the lake, and death was hungry.

By the time springtime rolled around, all that was left of my father's family were the bones that he hauled into the lake at the first thaw.

Of course, my father was no longer himself from the day he entered the lake. He was Tallahatchee, and the Tallahatchee were sica.

The Tallahatchee had survived for years on stranded settlers caught by winter in the valley or the stragglers from other tribes, left behind due to illness or injury. In the valley, the Tallahatchee were the hunters, all else were prey.

Ultimately, they became too greedy, too cunning, and too ravenous for their own good. The best hunters tried to hoard food from the weakest. The weakest were not lacking in

cunning, and they soon set traps of their own, killing those that would deny them food, dividing the tribe into warring factions. They did not see the error of this infighting until winter held them firmly in its grasp and it was too late. My father says that in his dreams he can see the last two members of the tribe, shivering with cold, afraid to fall asleep lest the other attack. By the time one man finally passed on, his flesh was so weak and damaged it no longer held any power, and the second succumbed himself shortly thereafter.

But evil never dies. It simply moves on.

Since the winter that my father first felt the hunger, more than a century and a half has passed. My father took a bride, hoping for a son to carry on the family name, not knowing that death would not claim him so long as he continued to harvest others. Shortly after I was born, he devoured my mother, succumbing to a craving deeper than sex or companionship. He says he felt grief about that, but I've always doubted his sincerity, watching the way he attacks the last morsel of meat attached to the bone. He must have felt something though, seeing that he has allowed me to live all of these years.

Of course, my daughter and I are hardly innocents. I was given human flesh from the time that my mother was killed. I understand that I even partook of her, although I was too young to have any distinct memory of it.

Mary came about by accident. It was no accident that I desired the man who became her father, but finding myself with child afterward was quite unexpected. It made me wish that he were still with us, but of course that was not to be. Winter was coming, after all.

My father and I hid our cravings from Mary for years, until she was old enough to understand them, or so we thought. We fed her the meat of an Indian woman, boiled to a deep brown, before revealing the dinner's source. We were not prepared for her reaction to the Indian woman's corpse. Mary's eyes dangled from their sockets, her fingers drenched in her own blood, before my father and I could restrain her. Her blindness ended up being more of a blessing than a curse, however, as we continued to feed her, and she stopped asking what it was. I realize that the hunger had taken her, and she knew what the answer was, whether she asked or not.

Over the years, we've gotten efficient at gathering food for the winter. At first it was difficult, and there were lean times, but as more and more people moved westward, there was little to worry about. In the early 1900's, there was a time when my father had to venture out of the valley for food, but he was a successful hunter and we seldom went hungry. We kept to ourselves and kept up a good front for our inevitable neighbors, even growing vegetables out behind the cabin to allay suspicious minds.

When the population slowly began to accumulate around us, we were forced to adhere to a strict rule of not harvesting any

neighbors closer than five miles. The last thing we needed was a lynch mob at our door. We kept to ourselves, secluded from the rest of the community, and were rarely hungry.

By the 1940's, there were roads running through the valley and we found that travelers were plentiful and nearly untraceable. It would be more exciting to tell you that there were close calls, but the fact is that there weren't.

But there is, as you might have guessed, another side effect to the life that was thrust upon us. My daughter is nearly one-hundred and thirty years old, and I am twenty years older than that. My father is eighteen years my elder.

Most people nowadays simply assume that we are either husband and wife (although they don't know which of us is the wife) or some other arrangement of family. We are ancient, bony and ugly, but still healthy and stealthy as ever. I suppose that our appearance has made hunting easier than ever. Who would suspect us?

I may sound smug and a touch glib (and reading over what I have written, I realize that this is the case), but I am tired. Desperately tired.

Celia stopped. She could sense her father's presence, getting closer. She grasped the box of poison in her unsteady hand and dumped the remainder of it into the

half-finished glass of cloudy water. Grimacing, she lifted the glass to her lips and swallowed it down. Her vision was beginning to blur. Her handwriting became an unsteady scrawl as she rushed to finish.

*The trees are dead. They have aged as we have aged,
withered as we have withered. Their branches reach to the
heavens like greedy skeletons, seeking to pull down the sky.
The banks of the lake are mottled and gray. Beneath the ice,
the water is an impenetrable black.*

Sica.

*The snow outside is deep. The interstate, a four lane
superhighway that arcs around the outskirts of the Lake
Tallahatchee valley, was unveiled early in the fall and,
combined with the extreme foulness of the weather, it has
sapped the traffic through our valley to a trickle. We were
overconfident, lazy, and have failed to stockpile in recent
months, knowing that there was more, always more.*

*My father has already taken our nearest neighbors, the
Cavanaughs, and we are sure to be discovered in springtime.
The extreme chill of the winter has brought the mice inside,
enticed by the warmth of our fire and the fresh corpses in the
cellar; another recent addition, dug by father last spring.
Father brought rat poison from the Cavanaughs. I've*

dragged more than one hundred tainted carcasses from the cellar thus far.

It has been weeks since we've been able to leave our home, and between ourselves and the rats, our food supply was depleted more than two weeks ago. This morning I discovered Mary crouching in the darkness of the cellar, the bodies of dismembered rats littering the floor around her, the smell of fresh blood on her breath. The small amount of poison in their bodies doesn't seem to have affected her. The sight of Mary's face, her cheeks smeared in flesh and blood, brought the realization that immediate and extreme action had to be taken.

We are ravenous. We've not gone this long without nourishment before, and I know that it wouldn't be long before we'd suffer the fate of the Tallahatchee, if I were to let it come to that. But I will not.

Before I go, hear my final words of caution: whatever you might find here, leave immediately upon reading my words and burn this place to the ground. Leave and never look back, or run the risk history repeating. This place is bad. This land is sica.

May God look on us with mercy,

Celia Mulray

December 2006

Celia felt a creeping pain in her belly as the poison began to take hold. She prayed that it would be enough for all of them.

She looked up from her writing. Mary had not moved. She stood at the end of the hall, breathing shallowly, listening.

“He’s back, Mother,” she whispered, her face taut with expectation. “He’s here now.”

The knob on the front door of the cabin began to open. Celia stood, stopping to retrieve the razor-sharp hunting knife her father used to skin the bodies. The knife scraped the surface of the table as she pressed it into her shaking palm. Her father had returned, and he had returned empty-handed, as she knew he would. The bone-chilling winds and whipping snow wouldn’t have allowed him to stray far enough to find sustenance.

“Mother? What was that noise?” Mary stood, facing the door, her head moving from side to side.

Celia plunged the knife deep into her own belly and yanked upward. A burst of air escaped her lips, echoing the gasp that Celia heard her father utter behind her. Hot, wet blood slicked Celia’s hands, pain slamming into her with the force of a sledgehammer.

Mary's head swayed back and forth, her nose wrinkling in staccato sniffs. She was hunting. With stunning quickness, Mary was upon her, her face buried in Celia's chest with ferocious zeal, her chin slathered in blood as she gnawed.

As Celia swooned toward darkness, she saw her father appear over Mary's shoulder, his face a mask of insanity. Mary howled in a rapacious rage as Joshua tore at her hair, growling like a rabid beast. They clawed at each other, shredding flesh and cloth in a frenzied battle for the prey that lay before them. Joshua was stronger, heaving Mary aside with a shove. He yanked the knife from Celia's chest and plunged it into Mary's throat. Mary continued to clutch at his back, consumed by a hunger more powerful than death, oblivious to her own pain.

As darkness overwhelmed her, Celia felt her father's teeth scraping against her bones, tearing the flesh from her ribs.

A Better Place

The sun had turned from a bright star into a dark amber juggernaut, slowly descending into the horizon line. The sea was silent as she stroked against the waves, struggled to stand still. The wind whistled through her hair, wisps blown into the air, dancing toward the sky. Her arms beat circles against the waves.

Treading water. That's what her instructor had called it. She called it standing still. Her feet flared out, together, out. They beat against the tide, feeling its pull but resisting.

Seagulls brayed and cawed, desperate to bring her back to shore, to continue the feeding she'd begun. It was a daily ritual. She brought the bread, day old bread, and they circled, tentatively pecking at her outstretched hands. Her father had taken her photograph countless times, her auburn hair taken in the wind as the birds descended as if on parachutes to snatch at the crumbs. They circled like

clouds, ominous yet ultimately harmless. The photographs tracked the passage of time like height marks on the wall. Jill at four, at ten, at sweet sixteen. Each summer a new set but the same scene. “Jill holds communion with the gulls, 1996” declared the careful handwriting beneath one. “Communion 2006” was the latest. The photos stopped when her father was taken.

Taken by the hands of God. She’s seen the hands --- not soft, welcoming, not open arms. Gnarled. Vengeful. Clawed. But she was unafraid.

He’s in a better place. Soon she would be too.

The beach was mostly deserted now; the weekday sunbathers had had their fill and returned home. Darkness had begun to creep in with the tide.

The waves swelled, her body leapt up, then bounced downward. The sun continued to sink.

The water lapped at her hands, collapsed upon itself with a splash. She breathed deeply and held her breath.

Her feet stopped, coming together in a pirouette. Her body descended, floating downward, drifting further from the shore.

She'd gotten to two minutes without gasping, but she knew she'd have to do better. Thirty seconds. Forty. The pressure in her head grew. Fifty. Sixty.

"We all go to a better place," the minister had said. That's all she wanted. *A better place. A quiet place.*

She whispered in her head, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

Eighty. Eighty-five

"Hallowed be thy name."

Ninety.

"Thy Kingdom come."

One hundred.

Oh God.

"Thy will be done."

Her lungs began to ache.

"On Earth as it is in Heaven."

The light from above rippled, darkening to a lavender glow. She descended.

One hundred twenty.

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

One hundred twenty-five.

“And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

A hungry seagull erupted with a squawk, the sound eaten and muffled by the waves. The water grew colder.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Colder.

“For thine is the Kingdom.”

Her lungs burned, her mouth opened involuntarily, choking, gasping for air.

“And the power.”

One hundred thirty.

“And the Glory.”

One hundred thirty-five.

“Forever and ever.”

Sand swallowed her toes. She descended into it, thrashing, the water exploding grains of sand outward. Water filled

her lungs as she clawed at the ground beneath her, cold hands, fingers digging.

Her eyes bulged, the water crushing her, breaking her.

He's here. I know He's here. . .

Suddenly, phantom hands met hers, stretched toward her from the blackness.

Clawed. Tearing.

Welcoming.

Grabbing, burrowing, ripping at her ribs. Sinking into her flesh, sending trails of blood skyward.

An angel?

A devil?

A better place. As darkness descended upon her, she smiled.

Amen.

Maria

They're gone now.

The phrase echoed through his head.

They're gone.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

What was her name? Carly? Carlene?

Marlene. That’s right.

“What are you doing here all alone on your birthday? I mean, at your age...”

They're gone.

“I’m sorry,” she said, noting the cloud that darkened his features. “I didn’t mean it to come out that way. It’s just that you seem like a nice guy, and I would have thought someone would have snatched you up by now.” She took

a drag off of her cigarette. "I'm babbling again, right?" She tried to smile, but only half made it. She flicked her cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. Her fingers trembled a little, just enough to spill some of the ashes off onto the bar. She looked down. "You don't have to answer that. I know I am."

But he did answer. He stared at his hands clenched tightly together in his lap. He couldn't look at her, but he could hear her shifting in her seat as the words tumbled from his lips. As he spoke he felt the storm pass from his shoulders to hers. From the corner of his eye he watched the color in her cheeks fade, watched the anxious fidgeting, and knew he'd said too much. He always said too much.

Then, at the last, when he was certain she'd leave, he finished the story.

They're gone.

It is raining when he buries them. Cold. The cookie-cutter perfection of the hole in the ground angers him.

It should be jagged, he thinks. It should have been ripped from the ground, not scooped neatly by a machine.

It strikes him how neatly kept the cemetery is. There is no evidence of the random nature that brought its

residents to this place. It makes him want to spit, to scream, to curse, but he stands quietly as the minister recites The Lord's Prayer. The words flit through his mind, then disappear.

"Our Father who art in Heaven..."

Thunder roars, drowning out the words, and he's thankful for the respite from the drone of another unanswered prayer.

The twisting in his stomach continues for months. The retching, the vomit-splatter in the toilet bowl becomes as much a part of his nightly ritual as dinner. He weighs two hundred pounds. Then one-ninety. One-eighty. He stops checking when he reaches one-seventy, but he can feel the hard curve of his ribs beneath his shirt. He stops going to work.

His brother's face tells the story when he opens the door. He has become gaunt, a word that he could never use in a sentence before, but that he now knows fits perfectly. His brother's eyes drop from his as he picks up his bags for an impromptu "get away from it all" trip through the Rockies. He knows he can't get away.

He smiles and nods at all the right spots during the trip, and looks sufficiently impressed by dozens of mountains whose names he won't remember as his brother snaps

shot after shot on a red instamatic camera. When they return home, his brother helps him remove old photos from their frames. They replace them with the Colorado scenes.

But, when he looks, he only sees Maria.

Maria at the beach, her blue eyes squeezed in a squint, her golden hair lit up like a halo, tendrils dancing on the wind.

Maria pulling her sister into a playful hug, Maria's full lips puckered against her cheek.

Maria in their bed, groggy but smiling, her shirt bunched beneath her breasts revealing the soft pink of her belly, her toes peeking from under the sheet.

It is nearly a year before he cleans out her closet. Her family insists.

You need to heal, they say. You need to move on. She would want it that way. He laughs at their presumption, startling them into silence. He startles himself by apologizing and promising to try.

Still, empty boxes continue to surround their bed, collecting little but dust. Finally, he begins. Day after day he pulls the clothes from their hangers and sits,

clutching them to his chest, searching for signs of her smell, a strand of her hair, anything that gives the clothing substance.

One day he finds a sweater. It is wrinkled, red, with three buttons up the front. Several lint balls and a single strand of hair cling to one of the sleeves. He sees all and none of this. The sweater is filled with her scent.

Closing his eyes, he breathes.

Covering his face, he breathes.

Rocking on the floor, he breathes and he can not stop until the scent is gone. He sleeps on the floor, wrapped in the sweater's arms.

He pauses. Marlene's eyes are wet. Her right hand rests on his thigh.

"What happened?" she whispers.

When the bulge in Maria's belly becomes too uncomfortable for sleep, she begins taking blankets and pillows to the couch, where she can prop herself up and redistribute the weight.

She thumbs through books of baby names. *Ralph.*
Robert. Roderick.

He laughs at the last one. What if it's a girl? *he says.*

Ralph. Robert. Roderick, she begins again, smiling wickedly.

He helps her each night as she struggles to wrap herself in a cocoon of blankets. When she is comfortable, he kisses her goodnight.

She begins her sleep nestled in a mound of comforters and sheets, but in the morning she looks as he later remembers her in the picture: the covers thrown to the floor, a lone sheet snaking randomly around her belly and legs, her long, pink toes peeking through.

In his present nightmares, he imagines the flames snaking around her legs, consuming the sheets, covering her forever.

The smoke alarm battery is low, and Maria can't sleep. The alarm beeps, infrequent but high-pitched. Standing on a chair, he rotates the plastic cover until he feels it loosen and fall into his hand. He snaps the battery loose and replaces the cover.

I'll get a new battery tomorrow, he tells her.

Ok. Goodnight, she whispers.

Goodnight, he says, kissing her cheek.

He arrives home late. She'd planned the night for him. That was the irony. Maria was too big to go out, so she'd made arrangements for his friends to pick him up from work and take him out for a night on the town. *It's the big three-oh*, she'd said. *You don't want to sit around here with me. I'll still be here when you get home, then we'll celebrate.*

Four fire engines lined the curb in front of his home, bathing the night in revolving splashes of red and white light. Black boots kicked at the door, axes beat heavily against the wood. Tongues of flame licked at the windows, devouring the curtains. He heard a pop, then the breaking of glass as the heat and pressure burst through. *My wife*, he heard someone scream, for surely this couldn't be happening to him. He strained against the police officers who held his arms, but his struggle would only produce bruises.

My baby...

Sir! It's too late.

My wife and my baby!

It's too late sir, they're gone...

It wasn't the end of the story, but as he'd expected, it was more than enough for Marlene. He watched her face. He'd seen the expression before. At least she'd sat with him for a while before politely excusing herself to use the restroom. She hadn't returned. He expected nothing less.

The inquest was rough. The investigators rougher. Words like arson. Deliberate. *Murder*. But the evidence turned up nothing to support those words, and soon the accusations faded. *Died*. And he was left with nothing but the solitude of his memories.

At two a.m., the lights came up. He blinked blearily and swung heavy legs from beneath the bar to join the late night stragglers in their forced exodus.

Outside, rain fell, scattering across the blaze of the streetlights before plunging blackly into the street.

She stood underneath the streetlight, leaning against it, her short, black hair matted against her head by the rain. She saw him see her and began to shift nervously.

Not tonight. I can't take any more of this tonight, he thought, *and began to turn away.*

"Hey..." Her voice was soft, but carried enough...

...command?

No.

Hope.

It carried enough hope to cause him to turn back to her before he knew what he was doing.

The soaked stump of a half-smoked cigarette wiggled between her shivering fingers as he approached her. She didn't have a coat, and her clothes were slick with rain. She attempted another smile, and this time nearly made it.

"I'm sorry about before, about leaving, I mean," she started. "I just got a little, I don't know...freaked, I guess."

I know, he started to say, but then he was taking off his coat and wrapping her in it, and words seemed unnecessary.

"Anyway, I'm sorry," she said again, her full, round eyes pleading to his.

Blue, he noticed. Her eyes were blue.

“So it’s your birthday? Make a wish,” she smiled. Before he could respond, she leaned forward and kissed him.

When she smiles, she looks just like Maria, he thought.

A distant thunder rumbled and she pulled his coat more tightly against her. As he fumbled to put his arms around her, fumbled to find his voice, she kissed him again, softly. The rain continued to fall.

Waiting

I.

I saw your ghost
standing in a white t-shirt
waiting...

II.

Can I get you something for the pain?

Don't leave...

This will help you sleep.

DON'T LEAVE.

I'll be right back.

wait for me

There are moments in life when the burn of blood through your veins is a welcome reaffirmation of life. This is not one of those times. I can feel my blood. It pulses around my temples and tears through my eyes, convulsing my eyelids. It is my hand that burns as I reach for the knob that will grant me final entrance to the room.

This key seems much too large as I fumble like a blind man, slowly tracing, then entering the hole. The click as the door swings open hangs in the air like a slap. I relax pressure on the box that I have been hugging too tightly to my body. It is a shoe box that once contained a gift from her. But today it has another use. I let out a breath and flip the switch just inside the door.

The fluorescent light in the kitchen flickers for a moment, then snaps to attention, spraying the kitchen with a ghostly pallor and the first thing I see is the spot. I hadn't noticed it the previous night. It's less than half an inch around, blackened and solid. I press a fingertip against it, feel its roughness, and bring the finger to my lips. The coppery taste of her blood brings with it a swoon of sickness. With numb hands, I open the small drawer at the right of the sink. Towels line up neatly in front, their feet tucked underneath them, their edges defined by

careful creasing. Behind the towels is the knife. Her image is solid for a moment and my heart jumps. Fear dissipates as I lift the knife to the counter and remove the stain with several short scrapes of the blade. I turn on the sink, run the blade through the hot water, close my eyes as her spirit invades me.

“What’s happening to us?” she asks, searching my face with her eyes.

“We’re eating potato chips,” I offer, an answer more flippant than I’d intended.

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

Of course I do. But this conversation is not new. It builds and climaxes to the same resolution, the same tears, the same threats. I glance up and she catches me with her eyes.

“You seem...different.” Her eyes drop.

“I don’t feel any different.” I can feel the burn of anger and pain creep into my stomach as her lips begin to tremble. We stand in silence and I watch the inevitable tear trickle from the corner of her eye and trace a path down her cheek to dangle from her chin.

Her eyes flicker upward to connect with mine for an instant, then fall. She whispers. “Why don’t you love me anymore?”

And I don’t have an answer.

My eyes reopen with a nearly audible snap. I pick a towel from the drawer, run the knife through it once and recklessly stuff it inside.

This kitchen suffers the same sterility as the whitewashed hospital rooms that I have become all too familiar with. The shelves are lined with porcelain elves and gnomes positioned for a dance. In the shocking white of fluorescent bulbs, they take on the look of terrified animals frozen in the light of a speeding truck. The floors sparkle with a surface brightness that overpowers the slight hint of crimson. Silver-lined chairs adjoin each other in perfect 90-degree angles around the round glass table. I switch off the light.

Moonlight pushes its way from the patio window through a dense mesh of curtains and guides me into the living room. A familiar numbness surrounds me in this darkness. Not quite fear, but the smell of something unnatural. At the age of five, I sensed a monster in my closet. Now thirty, the monster has again caught up with me. My breath stops suddenly and my chest constricts at

the sight of the figure huddled on the corner of the couch. I listen for the choked whimpers, look for bloodshot glances of her eyes.

Silence. Mercifully, the moonbeam crawls forward to outline neatly stacked pillows, resting in the shadows. A nervous laugh escapes my lips. Tiny droplets of sweat dance lightly across my forehead.

From the center of the room, I can see the black plastic on the patio outside, the makeshift toilet for shivering puppies while she avoided the cold. The heavy wind outside knocks an icicle from the iron railing and shatters its body against the building, sending its remains to rest among piles of frozen filth. I tug at the curtain, closing it tightly.

This living room was my distraction. The television, VCR, stereo—all diversions to keep me from thinking, to keep me sane when one of us had to be. I contemplate a thick book of art prints, strategically angled on the shelf, chronically unopened under a thin veil of dust. I sift through compact disks, making my selections, and dropping them into the box. Their plastic cases click together loudly and icy fingertips pinch my spine, accompanied by a panicked voice that whispers, *Shh! Don't wake her!*

Finally, there is only one room left. It is the room, (*the room, the room*). As I turn to the bedroom, gripping the

cold copper doorknob, I feel the numbness again and this time it brings with it ten thousand tiny pinpricks of terror and pain, suddenly, shockingly remembered. I am blinded by a year of Prozac moments and the explosion of the night before. I am stranded on an island of anguished cries, white t-shirts and blood, the smell of stagnation, blood, midnight alarm, *TOO MUCH BLOOD!* and the voice of reason, beaten down by desperate screams.

III.

The door swings inward

into nothing.

I step lightly,

swimming through blackness to reach the light,

to switch it on,

to see

you

swimming in your stain,

lying

arms spread

awaiting a final embrace.

Held in crucifixion

by hands that refuse to reach out,

a heart that can't find its rhythm.

Waiting...

My mouth opens and I am choking. My heart pounds with a deafening intensity as the box strikes the floor with a hollow rattle. There is nothing left here, nothing that is truly mine. I gasp for air and madly fumble with my keys, the key ring pinching my fingertips as I work to remove the key, her key. It breaks free and drops to the floor. My breath begins again in a scatter of short, panicked gasps as I move for the door, pausing as it opens only to turn the lock. A tumultuous sea of blackness and ghosts recedes with a solid click behind me as the door closes behind me.

We now share one room. Contained by the same walls, but still on opposite sides. She haunts me with a phantom voice, footsteps where there should be none. She is locked inside the room forever, and the room is

locked inside me. It is my turn now to lie with her
demons.

IV.

...and sometimes

I can see you in a stranger's glance

still waiting...

Mercy

A calm cold descended on Franklin Field, freezing solid the fine mist laid overnight, encasing the snow banks in ice.

A spatter of sleet continued to fall, off and on.

The temperature continued to drop, even as dawn began to break, the sun peeking through roiling storm clouds.

And Willie Everton continued to die.

She'd been crawling for several hours, nearly making it back to the road, pulling herself forward through a tangle of dead brush and mounds of snow, dragging her mangled and bruised body behind her.

Her scalp was fragmented, her hair caked with blood, her left eye gone, lying on the ground somewhere in the snaking trail left in the snow behind her.

She'd been stabbed several times, but could no longer feel her wounds. The throbbing in her head and the loss of vision forced her to be singular in thought: *make it to the road.*

The spitting sleet evolved into snowflakes. The cold that had repeatedly attacked Willie's body now insinuated itself deeper. Her mouth worked open and closed, gasping for air, as the cold attached itself to her heart and pumped icicles into her bloodstream. The wounds on her forearms gaped and cracked, seeping blood as she struggled forward.

A car's engine sputtered in the distance. Willie raised her chin and clawed at the ground in front of her, propelling herself forward. A VW Beetle lurched into view.

Willie's mind unleashed a psychic scream at the approaching car.

STOP . . . PLEASE STOP!

She would have cried out then, had it not been for the thick wall of mucus and blood strangling her vocal cords.

The car continued to lurch forward in time with the hiccuping bursts of engine power. Willie was less than ten yards from the road, but the car's driver showed no signs of seeing her.

PLEASE!

For a split second, as the car passed, the driver's head swung in Willie's direction and made eye contact. The world swam in slow motion. A look of startled recognition showed itself in the young man's features. Brake lights flashed.

Oh God . . . oh thank God . . .

The brake lights darkened and the car continued on, leaving Willie alone with the foul black smoke belched from the Beetle's engine.

Her stomach tightened, cramped, and began to heave its contents up. Blood bubbled up from her lungs and burst through her lips as she gagged and coughed. The coughing fit continued. Her body hitched and convulsed, forcing her to roll onto her side and bring her hands to her mouth. Only then did she realize the futility of her struggle.

The beast was crouched low to the ground, not more than ten feet behind her. Catching her glance, he smiled. In his hand dangled a blood-matted tire iron, clumps of Wilimena's hair sprouting from its end.

He listens.

The woman's breaths come in short, staccato gasps.

He listens to her hitching gasps, her face buried in the snow. A halo of red spreads in front of her, the heat causes steam to rise.

At the last, he thinks he hears a whispered prayer.

Mercy...

In the Bones

It's been almost as many weeks as I have fingers since Daddy got gone. *He'll come back. Come crawling back,* Mama said. *Like a fat rat to cheese.*

Mama hated the fat rats. *Fat rats.* She'd spit when she said it, like she'd got one on her tongue. *Fat goddamn rats.* Not long after Daddy got gone, Mama kept seein' the fat rats everywhere. Most of 'em live in town, down at the bank or over at the electric company. There was even some at our house a couple weeks ago, come lookin' for Daddy. *Fat FUCKIN' RATS.*

"Your Daddy'll come crawling back," Mama said. "He'll come back." She started telling everyone we saw, all the time, but nobody seemed to be surprised or bothered by it much. Mostly, they'd just keep on walking. She'd say it over and over and over again, like saying it'd make it so. She'd get louder and louder and sound real scary, and I'd know not to make a peep.

Fat rats.

I did peep once...one time when Mama was having a “spell.” That’s what she calls them. She was rocking in her chair, calling Daddy a fat rat, saying he’d be coming home soon, real soon and I felt a sneeze coming, up high in my nose. I closed my eyes hard and tried to make it go away. I shook my head right and left, and before I could go right again, Mama’d hit me square across the nose with the good book. It did the trick, knocked the sneeze right out, but it hurt real bad. I opened my eyes and there was Mama, God’s fire in her eyes and the bible in her shaking hand. She was yelling, “He WILL be back.” I said *no Mama, I know Mama*, but I saw the bible swinging towards me and the room sparked and went to black, like the t.v. set shutting off.

When I woke up, my head was on Mama’s lap and she was rockin’ back and forth on the couch. She was crying’ and a tear dripped off her chin and splatted across my cheek.

“Please don’t hate me, Tommy boy.”

“I don’t,” I said, but she didn’t seem like she heard me. She kept on crying, kept saying, *no-no-no-no-no*, over and over. Finally, she stopped rocking and stared down at me for a long, long time. She smiled, but her muscles got tight and her lap got real stiff.

“Your Daddy was an evil man, Tommy, and he tried so hard to make me evil too. But I am not your Daddy.” She shook her head and made a noise like a sigh, only deeper. “I just get . . . frustrated. That’s all.”

She leaned down ‘til her face was close enough that I could feel her breath. “Frustration is a weakness that only runs skin deep, Tommy boy. It’ll pass.” She leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. “My heart is filled with the Lord.”

Then her face got all twisted up and she looked me right in my eyes again. “Evil like your Daddy’s . . . it’s in the bones. It turns them midnight black and you can’t get it out, no matter how you try.” She laid back on the couch, slumped into it. “It’ll make you crazy. You think on that.”

It was Christmas day, three days after my birthday, the day that Daddy got gone. Mama used to hold up her pointing finger next to her thumb and tell people that my Tommy was this close to being with the Christ child, but he was in too big a hurry. That’s why God didn’t give him all his smarts.

It was my sixteenth birthday, my driver’s license birthday, but Mama said I couldn’t get one on account of my

disability. I didn't care much 'bout that, though, 'cause it was Christmas.

Mama and Daddy had just strung up the lights on the house. We got bunches and bunches of lights, so many that you could see the front door to Daddy's shed from our back porch, even at night, and that's a long stretch to look. The inside of the house was brighter still, with blinking white dots on the Christmas tree and in all the doorways. Mama sprayed the walls and floor with the snow that comes in a can that she got from the fat rats at the drugstore in town.

We just finished the decorating (Daddy said our house looked just like the North Pole) when Mama brought out her special eggnog. It didn't taste much like eggs, more like melted ice cream with cinnamon sprinkled in, and I drank it up until my stomach was all tingly and warm. It made my head feel like it had balloons floating inside it and I got all giggly. Mama and Daddy were laughing too, and we drank Mama's eggnog and sang Christmas Carols in front of the fireplace.

It wasn't long before Daddy started yawning and he laid himself down on the couch. A minute later he was snoring. Mama shook him once, but she said he was out. He looked so peaceful that watching him started to make me feel droopy.

I closed my eyes for just a second before I heard Mama say, “Come on, Tommy, it’s time to clean my little baby Jesus.” Mama smiled and took my hand, leading me down the hallway to the bathroom. It was time for the Christmas baptism.

Mama led me onto the cold tile, crossed herself and whispered, *we must cleanse the flesh for our souls to triumph*. She usually didn’t say we, but I didn’t think much of it. I was worried, and I asked her *What about Daddy’s soul?*, but she just smiled.

The faucet squeaked as she turned on the water and started to pour the bubble bath. When the bubbles grew big and thick on top, Mama tested the water with her fingers. *Just right*, she said, and she smiled again. It was different than her normal smile; it was a jumpy smile, crooked, and the corners of her mouth twitched up and down. She looked at me, then away, then at me again. “Close the door, Tommy,” she said softly and I did, pushing it shut with my back. The bathroom was getting hot from the steam coming from the tub, but both of us were shaking all over.

Mama smiled again, then her face disappeared behind the big Christmas sweater, red like her hair, that made crackly noises as she pulled it over her head. Some of her hair stood straight up after the sweater was gone, but the rest fell over her shoulders and down around her naked “bosoms.” That’s what Mama called them.

I looked away and took a step backward, but I could still see her out of the side of my eye. The doorknob rattled as my hand bumped against it, and I jumped a little.

Mama looked at the floor and pulled her pants down. She stepped out of her blue jeans. Next, her panties went down, and I could see the hair that covered the place where babies come from, as red as the rest of it.

The air got real hard for me to breathe and I closed my eyes. I heard water splash as Mama stepped into the tub. I opened my eyes and saw she was still smiling.

“Come here, baby,” she whispered. “Let Mama get her hands on you.” I shook my head, but took a step toward her. “That’s it, come to your Mama. I took another step.”

Mama’s hands were always warm, but when she touched me then, they felt like fire. I tried to pull away, but it only made Mama tug harder. I felt my eyes starting to water, but I didn’t want to cry, didn’t want to disrespect the baby Jesus and the sacred baptism.

“Shh, baby. Hush . . . it’s alright . . .”

Mama untucked my t-shirt and pulled it up over my head. The air was cold and felt even colder ‘cause of Mama’s hot hands. She put her hand on my shoulder, then let it fall down over my chest and across my belly to

the top of my jeans. Then she unbuttoned my pants and opened up the zipper. She slid them down and there I was, naked and cold. I was shaking again and I heard Mama say, come on, baby, get in where it's warm.

I reached down and broke through the bubbles with my pointing finger. The water was warm.

I put my feet in and started to slide down before Mama took me by the arms and pulled me into the water, pulling me up close. I tried to look at her, but she held my head, held me to her, pulling my cheek down against her bosoms. I could hear her heart thumping and I felt Mama's fingers rubbing against my leg. I felt her breath, hotter than her hands. "Come here, baby," she whispered. "Then she was turning me. Come here."

Mama held me tighter to her and I started to burn up. I couldn't breathe. I tried to pull back but she just wouldn't let go. Her fingernails bit me in the back.

Then something pushed my face into Mama's chest, hard, and my nose bent sideways. I looked up as Daddy grabbed me by my hair and tossed me out on the bathroom floor. I heard my head crack against the tile and the room went white twice before I could see again. Mama was standing up in the tub, leaned against the wall, and she and Daddy were both screaming words that I couldn't make out. Daddy swayed from side to side like he might fall down, stood straight up for a second, and

punched Mama in her belly. Her legs buckled and she fell down hard. Her face made an awful crunching-snapping noise as her chin hit the edge of the tub, and there was blood coming out of her mouth. Daddy's eyes got real big then, and he stumbled backward, kicking into me before he turned around and lurched out the door, using the walls to keep him up.

Mama didn't make a sound for a long time. Blood was making bubbles around the sides of her mouth, but she had the fire in her eyes. The water in the tub slushed and slid around and some of it slapped onto the floor and got Mama's sweater wet. Finally, Mama stood up, and that seemed to take a lot of work. Slowly, she pulled on her wet sweater. She picked up her panties and walked out of the bathroom, closing the door.

I was too scared to move, so I lay still on the floor, listening to the rumble of thunder outside. I must have drifted off, 'cause there was no thunder and sunlight was coming in the window when I opened my eyes again. I called out for Mama, but no one was in the house.

Mama came home later in the day. Daddy never did, even though Mama kept saying he would.

That's when the fat rats started coming. Mama waited tables in town, but she had wires in her mouth until a

couple of weeks ago, so she couldn't talk real good and she got moody. She said that's why the fat rats at work wouldn't let her work there any more.

Daddy didn't leave us with much money and Mama couldn't afford to pay all of the bills, so the fat rats at the electric company turned out the lights. They turned off the refrigerator too, and after a while, our food started to smell. I ate something green even though Mama told me to stay out, but I was just so hungry.

I got real sick then. I got vomit all over Mama's rug and she couldn't get it out. She threw out the rest of the food the next day, and then we didn't have enough money to get more. I was getting real hungry and even more sad. I was sure we were going to starve. I sat at the table for what seemed like at least two days, crying and whooping, feeling the rumble in my stomach. I slept off and on, but usually only when Momma was asleep or wasn't around. I figured that if she saw how sad and skinny I was getting and that I wasn't getting any rest, she'd find a way to get us some food.

All I guess I really did was make her mad. After the second day, I was still whooping and hollering and holding onto my stomach when Momma ran into the kitchen, opened up a cupboard and tossed a plate right at my head. I seen it coming, so I ducked down and it smashed into the wall behind me, smashed into a bazillion tiny pieces. Before I could get off the chair,

Momma had me by the ear and pulled me onto the floor. “Eat THAT, you SHIT,” she said, pointing at the broken dish on the floor. She let go of my ear then and went to the front door. She slammed the door behind her and I sat on the floor, keeping real quiet, for a long, long time. My stomach was hurting bad, but somehow I started to drift off. That’s when the storm set in.

I woke up when the lightning started. I heard a little boom; a thunder crash from a long ways off. Then there was another one, a little closer, and the room got real bright, then dark, then bright again, before finally settling on just being dark. I picked myself up off the ground and went to the window. Water was slapping against it like someone was throwing bucketfuls at the house. The trees were moving back and forth so hard that branches were coming off three or four at a time. I could barely make out Daddy’s shed.

I pressed my face hard up against the window and opened my eyes wide to get a better look. There was something moving out there, but it was too dark to make out what it was. There was another lightning flash, so bright that the whole yard lit up. That’s when I seen the rats.

Fat rats are coming. The sound of my voice scared me and I could feel my heart beating hard in my chest, jumping up at my throat.

Rats. Some as big as raccoons, others the size of a church mouse, but they were all movin' round Daddy's shed. They were scattered all over the yard, crawling out of the woods, out from behind rocks; some of them looked like they came out of nowhere, they just appeared. Around Daddy's shed, the little rats climbed over and around each other, hurrying in through little cracks between the boards, while the fat rats scratched holes in the ground underneath the boards, working hard to pull their big bellies through.

And then there was Mama. She came from around the back side of the shed, soaked to the skin, swearin' and swingin' Daddy's shovel, knocking fat rats this way and that. Some of 'em lay down, but most of 'em just got back up and hurried off into the yard. Then she caught a big one right smack in the snout with the tip of the shovel and it fell backward and didn't get up. Lightning flashed just as Mama brought the shovel down again and just about cut the fat rat in two. I felt queasy and stepped back away from the window.

A couple of minutes later, in came Mama, soaking wet, but looking real happy. "Got 'em, Tommy boy. Got them God damned fat rats. Got 'em good." She held out her right fist and smiled. She had three of them, big as all bejeezus, flopping against each other as they tried to get free. Well, actually, only two of them were movin', the

last one was the one I saw Mama get, and it didn't look much like it would ever move again.

I started feeling queasy again, and I knew Mama would be mad if I got vomit on the kitchen again, so I hurried on in to the toilet, just in case. I guess I didn't have to get sick, but I heard Mama saying, "Tommy . . . get back in here," then cursing and what sounded like her stomping on something wet.

I was afraid she was going to be mad at me, so I went into my room and got down behind the bed so she wouldn't find me and maybe would be happy again before she made me come back into the kitchen. I could hear her banging around in the kitchen, clanging on the pots and pans, but she never called for me again, so I just stayed where I was and waited.

After what felt like a long time, Mama came and got me. "What're you doing down there, Tommy? Mama's almost got dinner ready." I sat real still, trying to figure out if I was in trouble. Then she smiled. "Come on . . ." Her smile got bigger and she took my hand and pulled me to my feet. "Come on, Tommy boy. It's dinner time."

When I got to the kitchen, I felt queasy all over again. In the middle of the dinner table, the fat rats were floating in a pot of hot water, naked and gray and still as could be. There were two plates set on the table and Mama sat

down at one and it looked like she wanted me to sit at the other one, but I just couldn't.

"Come on, Tommy. It's dinner time."

I just stood there, looking at the pot. Two of the rats looked just like they were sleeping, except their hair was all gone and they were floating in water. The third one's head must've finally come loose from the cooking, and it floated around separate from the rest of it.

Something was trying to come up from my belly, and I gulped a couple of times to keep it down, but I couldn't.

I did it again.

I vomited right there in the kitchen, right there on Mama's floor, right in front of Mama. I could see from the look on her face that I was really in for it this time, but I couldn't stop. I tried to head toward the toilet, but I only made it to the hall before my stomach gurgled again and pushed more nasty stuff into my mouth. I held it in for a minute, but it made me gag and I had to open my mouth to get a breath of air and it spilled onto the carpet.

Mama was cursing behind me. "Just like your father, you little SHIT. You ungrateful . . . little . . . SHIT!" With each word came a swat to my backside. Then she grabbed me by my hair, just like Daddy'd done before he went

away, and dragged me back into the kitchen, through my mess, soaking it into my clothes. “You eat, you fuck . . . you bastard! You eat what your Mama gives you!”

Mama tried to get me back into my chair, but by then I was pulling hard to try to get away. I guess she must’ve just let go, ‘cause all of a sudden I was loose and scrambling toward the back door. I grabbed for the knob, yanked the door open, and tumbled out into the grass.

Mama was at the door right behind me, but she didn’t come through. She stood there, glaring at me, staring down at her Tommy boy with the fire in her eyes. “Go on then, shit. Go on out with your Daddy, you wicked, filthy pig. You’ll come back. Like a fat rat to cheese.” She smiled then and shut the kitchen door.

I didn’t really have anywhere to go then. I wasn’t thinking much past getting outside and now I didn’t have anywhere to go, and the rain was coming down hard as ever and it was starting to get cold out. I moved away from the house, ‘cause I knew I couldn’t get back in there, even if I thought I wanted to, which I didn’t.

Fat rats.

I started toward the shed, Daddy's shed. It wouldn't be real warm, but maybe there would be some of Daddy's old work clothes and it wouldn't be raining in there.

Fat fucking RATS.

It wasn't 'til I got close that I remembered about the rats. Even after Mama's shovel swinging, they were everywhere, scurrying around the base of the shed, flowing in and out through burrowed tunnels and holes chewed through the wood. There must've been at least a jillion of them. One of them skittered across my foot and I kicked it off and stumbled backward into the tall grass. My heart started to boom in my chest but I was getting wetter by the second and had to do something, before I caught my death of cold, like Mama always said I would.

I got my courage up and grabbed hold of the door handle and pulled, and it snapped right off in my hand, bringing a piece of the door with it, but the rest of it didn't move at all. There was a hole now where the handle was, but I couldn't see much inside cause it was dark.

But I could smell something. It smelled worse than anything, worse than when I used to go in my pants and hide 'em from Mama so she wouldn't get mad, and that got pretty bad.

Lightning flashed again, and the thunder that came after caused the rats to move faster, most of them pushing

inside the shed. I moved faster, too. I put my hand into the hold where the handle was and pulled on the wood. Another chunk snapped off, but not quite enough for me to get myself through. I stepped back a step and kicked at the door, and this time it seemed like the wood just crumbled into nothing and all that was left was a few pieces straggling from the hinges. I went back up to the hole in the wall and went inside.

I'd been inside Daddy's shed a bunch of times. Usually, it smelled like wood and machines, oil and metal; like the chair Daddy built or the lawnmower when he'd get it started in the spring. But this time there was something that smelled...wrong.

Lightning came again.

A man was sitting on Daddy's bench.

I only saw it for a second, but I was sure of what I saw. My insides let loose, and I peed myself. I stopped breathing as it trickled down my leg and into my shoes.

I back up a step, and my foot came down on something soft. I pulled it back and heard claws rushing away.

Rats.

Fat goddamn rats!

Everything around me was pitch black. Something grabbed onto my foot and tugged so hard, it almost knocked me down. I reached down and felt a great big hairy rat fuck! I felt its teeth sink into my hand and a yelled and fell backwards, kicking at the rat.

Hands.

Grabbing onto my shoulders.

“Get up, Tommy.” Mama’s voice was right behind me. Something flitted across the bench. “Go to your Daddy.”

A flashlight came on.

It was Daddy.

Sitting there, right where he always was, right where he was supposed to be.

Except Daddy’s head was gone.

One of his eyes was still there, and part of his nose and mouth, so I knew it was him.

But the rest of his head was gone. His back was leaned against the wall, his one eye staring out towards Mama and me.

My heart got stuck in my throat and my eyes started watering.

“I told you he’d be back.”

Half a dozen fat rats were running round Daddy’s feet, biting and chewing at his pants, at his legs. In places, I could see bone.

Evil is in the bones.

It was white.

I turned around to look at Mama, and the tears started coming.

She stood just outside the door, rain pelting against her head and back, and her face had a look I’d never seen before. Not happy, not sad...not anything. She had Daddy’s sawed-off in her hand, pointing at the ground. I once saw Daddy explode a rat with that shotgun, so the way Mama held it loose in her hand made me nervous.

“I told you, Tommy boy.”

“Mama?”

“Your Daddy was an evil, evil man.”

“No Mama. Look at the bones, Mama. You said . . .”

“Tommy. Oh, Tommy.

She raised the gun. I took a step backward, saw a wood carving knife on the bench next to Daddy, and picked it up. Mama giggled.

“Not for you . . .”

The tip of the gun kept going up and I took another step back, right into Daddy. The bench wobbled, then tipped and Daddy hit the ground hard, flopping onto his side. Mama closed her eyes.

“Our Father, who art in heaven . . .,” she started to pray.

I bowed my head in prayer, but she’d stopped.

Mama looked like she was going to kiss the tip of Daddy’s gun, but then she opened her mouth and put it inside. She took it in both hands and started to fumble with it.

“MAMA!”

The gun banged and Mama’s head exploded, pieces of red hair and blood flying every which way. Her eyes went blank and her body shook. She stood like that for a minute, then fell backward into the grass.

The fat rats went wild, scurrying across Mama’s body, some trying to get into the shed, some out, but all of them trying to get away. One flitted by, covered in red goo and bone chips, and pushed himself into Daddy’s head, curling up into a ball and shaking.

I looked at my Mama, then Daddy. My stomach heaved again and I spit chunks onto the floor. My face got hot, then cold, then my head blinked out altogether.

In the bones...in the bones...in the bones...

That's what Mama said. Mama said evil's in the bones, but it's not.

It's not, not, NOT.

I just don't know.

I DON'T know . . .

Daddy's skin practically fell off in my hands. I barely had to use the knife. Daddy taught me how to skin rabbits, so it wasn't too hard. *Tastes like chicken*, Daddy'd say.

Not this.

No.

The bones are white. WHITE.

I don't know. I just don't know!

Mama was harder. Not much, but harder. Her bosoms were heavy, not soft now, not really. But they came off, they all came off.

white.

I don't...

But I'll find out. I will.

hurts.

I'll find out now.

IT HURTS.

It's me, I know it is . . .

Evil is in the bones.

I won't feel it for long.

Just...

...slice, slice, peel . . .

Like skinning . . . a rat . . .

There more than one way to skin a rat, right Mama?

MAMA!

It's in the bones, Tommy boy.

. . . slice, slice, peel . . .

. . . bones . . . yes . . .

slice . . .

